

Review Article: Cities and Mandalas

Panauti, une Ville au Népal by V. Barré, P. Berger, L. Feveille, G. Toffin, with the collaboration of R. Fouque. Preface by C. Jest. Bibliothèque Berger-Levrault, Paris 1981.

Introduction¹

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This book is a landmark in the study of the ancient culture of the Kathmandu Valley. The project which produced it brought together an anthropologist already well-versed in the local language and culture, and three architects, and the result is a compelling picture of small multi-caste city, from the point of view of 'the anthropology of space' or what might be called architecture with a human face. The book's intrinsic merits, as well as the fact that it is published in French, a language not normally read by Nepali scholars, make a detailed review well worthwhile.

The cities of the Kathmandu Valley have attracted an enormous amount of scholarly attention from architects in recent years, because they represent one of the last functioning examples in the world of a pre-modern city. For the western architect of today, seeking in his work to combat the cold and inhuman nature of the industrial city, it must be fascinating to observe a city in which architecture and social structure fit each other like a glove, in which the most ordinary everyday activities are set in a sacred frame, in which religious values are expressed spatially and spatial concepts religiously, in which, in short, the whole process Max Weber called disenchantment, the de-magicking of the world, has not yet taken place.

The pioneering work which first addressed these themes was Ordered Space - Concepts and Functions in a Town of Nepal by Gutschow and Kölver. It pretended to be no more than a manifesto, but it paved the way for much future research by drawing attention to the way in which the city as a whole must be seen as a religious unit, how conceptually if not actually the royal palace lies at the centre of the city, how distance from that centre marks both social and religious status, and how the religious geography of the town integrates it into a single mandala, while at the same time sub-dividing it into sections (tol) whose boundaries are marked by the 'ways of the dead'. As Gutschow and Kölver succinctly put it, "the city mirrors the universe" (Ordered Space: 21). Macdonald and Stahl's book, Newar Art, broke new ground by putting Nepalese art back into its socio-religious context, a context which includes of course the spatial themes alluded to; but in the nature of their work, they could only give the briefest of descriptions. Gutschow himself has subsequently produced a book, Stadtraum und Ritual der newarischen Städte in Kathmandu-Tal, Eine architekturanthropologische Untersuchung, which carries the case further by providing a wealth of new material on the spatial structure of the Kathmandu Valley towns.

In trying to cover them all, though, as well as dealing with Indian parallels, he once again points the way for further research, rather than providing the definitive picture of the religio-architectural structure of one city.

Anthropologists have not been so eager to study in the Kathmandu Valley, put off no doubt by the forbidding complexity of the social structure, and a Great Tradition based on Sanskrit. Where they have studied Newars, it has usually been in villages. Most of the data for the only general ethnography, G.S. Nepali's The Newars, was gathered in the village of Panga. The first work of Toffin himself was in the small and picturesque, but otherwise rather atypical, village of Pyangaon. Since then Toffin has produced a string of meticulous ethnographic articles and his high standards of accuracy are everywhere evident in Panauti. Thanks to his presence on the team, architecture and ethnography have come together to produce a work of major importance, unmarred by the a priori speculations on the social realm which are so often used as a substitute for real knowledge.

Social Structure

Toffin's experience shows, to start with in the team's choice of Panauti as a fieldsite. As the authors themselves say (p.12), its size (only 3,000 inhabitants) meant that it was possible to work in depth, and cover the whole town, in a way which would have required inordinate time and resources in Bhaktapur, Patan or Kathmandu. At the same time, Panauti is a complex, multi-caste settlement which was a royal centre in the 14th century; thus it possesses, though on a smaller scale, the spatial, architectural and religious traditions which this entails and which Gutschow and Kölver pointed out in Bhaktapur. Experience is further evident in the author's account of caste. Tables 1, 2, and 3 provide a model of this kind of work, superior on two counts to previous attempts to provide a summary of the Newar caste system. Firstly, table 3 shows the average amount of land owned per person of each caste, and secondly, table 2 shows how three principles help to structure the hierarchy: (1) whether or not the sacred thread is worn, (2) who cuts hair and nails, and (3) who cuts the umbilical cord.

Two facts emerging from the discussion of caste do however lead me to feel some slight caution about taking over the conclusions of this study wholesale in order to understand the larger cities of the Kathmandu Valley. Firstly, in Panauti only 4.27% of the population, 17 households out of 475, is of the farmer (Jyāpu) caste. Anyone who has studied in Kathmandu, Patan or Bhaktapur knows the important, not to say pivotal, role of the Jyapu caste in religion and society there. In its large number of Shresthas and few Jyapus, Panauti is perhaps similar to ² Dhulikhel, an old-established but somewhat unusual Newar settlement.

Secondly, there is the relative unimportance of Buddhism in Panauti. The authors explain that Hindus and Buddhists call different sets of priests to carry out their household rituals and continue (p.28):

However, the distinction between Hindus and Buddhists is only one of degree; it is merely a question of the type of priest and not a religious one. Followers of the two religions can be seen worshipping the same gods, taking part in the same festivals, and they have the same moral and religious values.

I have no doubt that this is true of Panauti, where the number of Buddhists is very small. For the cities of the Kathmandu Valley, even for Bhaktapur, it is, I would estimate, at best a simplification.

Urban Space

The book is divided into 3 sections dealing with "urban space", the house and with the way that both develop. The first section, after a general discussion of the history, caste, and administration of Panauti, describes the spatial organisation of the town. With an attractive series of maps it is shown how the town is surrounded by eight mother goddess shrines, possesses nine squares (nani), twenty quaysides (ghāt), twenty-eight shelters (pāṭi), and nine dancing platforms (dabu). A useful table covering two pages shows how these different places are used by different categories of people. The authors also show how the town can be divided into sections in several different ways: according to six old administrative division (tol), according to which of the ten Ganesh shrines is visited in the course of daily rituals, or according to which of the three most important mother goddess temples is visited on the occasion of rites of passage (map on p. 56). Interestingly, none of these sub-divisions bears any relation to any other, or so it seems. The only religio-spatial elements the authors have not provided us with are, I believe, the 'ways of the dead' and the distribution of the deities pīṭha, Nāsadya and chwāsā.³

Two elements of spatial organisation to be found in Panauti had already been shown to be important for Bhaktapur in Ordered Space: a binary division into the upper and lower towns (thane and kwane) and the route taken by chariot festivals around the town (the pradakṣiṇā patha), which is also binary in nature because it divides the town into that which lies inside it and that lying outside. The former distinction is, perhaps not surprisingly one of the most basic:

This is something found in all Newar settlements, whether urban or rural. The orientation of the two parts is determined by the slope of the nearest river (p.46).

A further important binary opposition, which is, I believe, proposed in this context for the first time here, is that which obtains between

the city and the holy area of temples just outside it at the confluence of the two rivers which flow on either side of the city (mythically a third - underground - river also contributes to the confluence making it especially holy):

The gods of the confluence are male and do not accept blood sacrifice. In the palace zone, by contrast, honour is given to goddesses who 'drink blood' and who are, therefore, less pure according to Hindu rules. The gods of the confluence have Brahman or Renouncer priests, whereas the goddesses' priests are primarily the tantric Karmachariyas, who are lower in caste. It is also fair to say that the confluence is associated with the values of renunciation, whereas the 'palace' is rather connected to life in the world. Here we find the opposition which is fundamental to Hinduism between the Brahman who represents sacred knowledge and the Ksatriya who represents political and military power (p. 51-3).

The authors themselves note that the contrast is less sharp, though it still exists, in Kathmandu and Bhaktapur. In the cities of the Kathmandu Valley, the same contrast is also evident within the city, between the deities inside the palace and those immediately in front of it.

Does the pradaksina patha divide pure from impure?

The authors summarise their view of the role of the pradaksina patha, the circumnabulatory route taken by deities in their chariots or palanquins, thus:

This processional route is socio-religiously extremely important because it divides the population of the town into two groups: the pure, who live inside the route, and the impure, who live - with the exception of the tailor-musician caste - outside it. This disposition is connected to the opposition of left and right, pure and impure: when the procession goes around the city, the impure castes are passed on the left, the pure on the right. Thus the meaning of these symbolic encirclements can easily be seen: they define an internal space which is sacred, civilised and pure, in opposition to the neighbouring countryside outside which is wild and impure (p. 41).

In Panauti the pradaksina patha does indeed seem to divide the town neatly into pure and impure parts, with the royal palace inside it. But in Patan, Bhaktapur and Kathmandu, the royal palace is always left outside the processional route. How are we to account for this? One might try to save the thesis by qualifying it thus: perhaps all those areas which open onto the processional route are to be considered as symbolically lying inside the pradaksina patha - that is, those areas whose main doorway (mū lūkhā) through which all important exits (e.g. at death) or welcomings (e.g. at marriage) must pass, opens onto the route. However even this does not save the thesis, because there are old-established areas in both Kathmandu and Patan (I am less well

acquainted with Bhaktapur) where the inhabitants are unequivocally of clean, even high, caste status, whose main doorway opens onto an alley or street which is well outside the pradaksina patha. The inhabitants themselves, it must be said, are not unduly worried about being on the gods' left hand when they circumnabulate the town. They would certainly never infer from this that they are ritually inferior to those who happen to live on the other side of the route, and would be horrified to learn that they must be impure because of this.

It seems to me that the authors have made a slight mistake here. It is not the pradaksina patha which "defines" pure and impure, but the city walls (see the maps on pp. 48, 119, and 162 of Gutschow's Stadtraum und Ritual).⁵ Untouchable castes (principally the Pode/Po) must live outside them, whereas those who are not untouchable, but from whom water may not be accepted, i.e. the butchers (Nāy; Nepali, Kasāī), may live just inside the walls. (This is the distinction between thiye ma jyū pīm - not ti ma ju pi as the authors have it on p.27 - and those who are merely la: cale ma ju pīm)⁶.

The case of the Jogi (Nepali, Kusle), tailors and musicians who, like the butchers are not untouchable but are water-non-acceptable, and live scattered throughout the city in public shelters, does not contradict this rule, precisely because they live in public shelters, not in houses (though of course nowadays many have indeed been converted into houses). They live in shelters because of their socio-religious identity as Saivite ascetics, and they are scattered about the city because they are in fact a caste of householders providing necessary services at death to the rest of the population and must be on hand to perform them.⁷

Whereas Newars seem to be indifferent to the question of whether they live inside or outside the pradaksina patha, they are not at all indifferent, or were not until recent times, to whether they lived inside or outside the walls. Stories are often told of people presumed dead and carried out of the city; once beyond the walls, even if they revived, they could never be accepted back by their families, and had to spend the rest of their lives as mendicants. In the old days, I have been told in Kathmandu, death associations (guthis) would not come to cremate anyone who set up house outside the city walls, an extremely powerful deterrent to so doing. Nowadays of course the rules have been relaxed. Thus the pradaksina patha neither defines with logical exactitude the limit of the pure and the impure, nor, as a boundary, does it exercise the imagination of the people themselves.

There is a pseudo-anthropological way of speaking which assumes that rituals 'do' things, particularly strengthening social structure, affirming ties and other praiseworthy activities. The most promiscuous use of such phrases which I know of in the literature on Nepal is to be found in Mary Anderson's The Festivals of Nepal. To their credit, the authors of Panauti only really talk like this once, when discussing one of the main festivals of the town in which the chariots of Indresvar Mahadev and Ummatta Bhairav are rushed against that of Bhadrakali in imitation

sexual intercourse:

The point of these mock sexual unions is to revive the life of the city, to reconstitute urban space. The community regains its energy and cohesion by means of this coupling of the gods (p. 46).

As my friend Rajendra Pradhan once remarked to me, far from festivals bringing about greater cohesion, it is precisely then that fights break out setting one area (tol) against another, one family against another, or one caste against another. In general, large urban festivals do not create cohesion, but merely express it; when cohesion is on the decline, the festivals suffer, and individual castes who see their role as demeaning refuse to participate, as is already happening in Kathmandu.

Thus I think we should not say that the annual chariot festival of Panauti "reconstitutes urban space" or "revivifies the community" but merely, and more prosaically, that it expresses the fact that the city is richer, more powerful, more interesting, and above all more holy than the surrounding countryside. It is indeed the most vivid and public expression, though by no means the only one, of the city's holiness. Another point in favour of this formulation is that most of the peasants from Panauti's hinterland whom I saw watching the festival in 1982 would, I think, understand and assent to its elements. And the pradaksina patha which the chariots follow, is then merely one element expressing, or helping to constitute if you like, the purity of the city relative to the countryside, rather than directly determining or even reflecting the distribution of purity and impurity within the city.

The historical development of Panauti

At the end of the first section of the book the authors offer their hypothesis as to how the town of Panauti developed historically. They show that the layout of the town, with its gates, shelters and quaysides, approximates quite closely, allowing for a little adaptation to local topography, to the dandaka model, one of eight town plans described and prescribed in classical Hindu architecture texts. They speculate that the original nucleus of the town was at the point where three roads come together by the monastery Dharma Datta Mahavihara:

One day a 'king' decides to transform a village or small settlement into a royal town. He structures this space by putting forward a model suitable for the existing settlement, so as not to disrupt it. The centre of the existing village which was at the square of the Dharma Datta Vihara, he moves a short distance to the spot where the royal palace now is... He also lays down the number of pati, dabu, nani and ghat to be built in the future so that, added to those already in existence, their number will be correct and the city in conformity with the architectural model (p. 88).

Gutschow has presented a very similar hypothesis about the development of Patan, that at the foundation of the present palace the city centre might have been moved one block to the south-east from the hillock that is known in local folklore as the site of the Kiratas' palace. If this is correct, it would show that in Patan too a Buddhist vihara (here Manimandapa Mahavihara, one of the bahi class of monasteries which are supposed to be older than baha) was at the nucleus of the town. These hypotheses, suggestive of the role of Buddhism in the early settlement of the Kathmandu Valley and its surroundings, urgently need to be tested by archaeological investigations.

It is perhaps unfair to criticise the Panauti team for not adding an archaeologist or an epigrapher to their project. But a collection of all available inscriptional and documentary evidence, in the way that has been done by Dhanavajra Vajracharya and T.B. Shrestha for Nuwakot and Dholakha would have provided a whole new dimension to the book; or rather, it would have given us a second book to go with the first, which would perhaps have answered many of the questions the authors have raised. For instance, might we actually be able to prove that the classical texts of Hindu architecture were known and used? Does the historical evidence allow us to say when the mother goddess shrines started to be conceived of as a set? When did the cult of Ganesh become ubiquitous? What political functions did the tols, or the other subdivisions of the city, perform before 1769? These and other historical questions need to be tackled using the social scientific framework of the French team.

Domestic Architecture

The second section of Panauti deals with the types of Newar house, their construction, and the way that they are used. One could hardly hope for a better discussion of the various styles in use, the relations between them, the way that they are developed and the new elements - first Rana style, then the 'modern' style - which have appeared. Particularly welcome is the way in which the authors have included the low castes in their typology, which leads to an interesting, and perhaps unexpected, result. The untouchable, sweeper caste and poor members of other castes have at first glance the same kind of two-storey thatched huts. But the sweepers, traditionally, make a quite different use of the space: their houses are not aligned side by side, they do not use the top of the house for cooking, and in general they ignore the spatial organisation common to all other Newars. Poor Newars of other castes, with houses externally no different from those of the sweepers, divide them up in the same way as owners of the 3- and 4- storey houses. This

implies not only the need to establish the traditional division between the front and the back, the top and the bottom of the house, but also the desire to isolate family life, to protect it from intrusions from outside (p. 113).

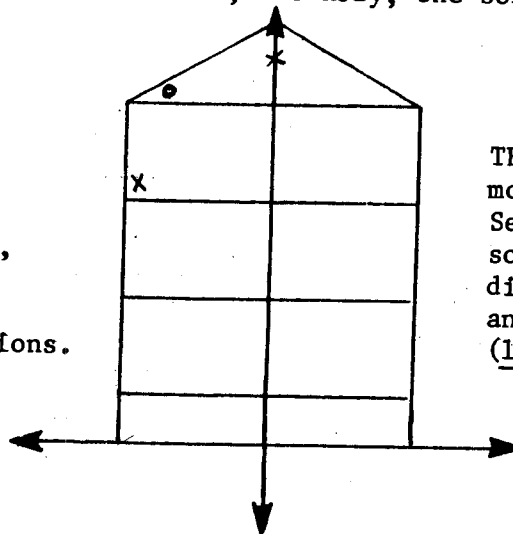
As the authors remark, the traditional sweeper house is therefore more similar, in construction and conception, to the house of the Nepalese hills than to those in their immediate vicinity. Over the last 30 years however, as their material position has improved slowly, they have built houses which have grown much closer to the Newar model.

Other subjects discussed include: methods of construction; reasons for the short life of the Newar house; and (in the first part of section 3) the ways in which houses are subdivided and extended over time, so that lineages cluster together and the characteristic small courtyards (cok) are formed. As elsewhere in the book, all these topics are illustrated with attractive diagrams, drawings and photographs.

As to the authors' findings on the use of domestic space, one can do no better than to quote their own summary by reproducing the table on page 163, combining it with the indications (given on p. 114) of deities, and the preferred cooking place (at the back of the topmost floor):

UP: ritual food, the holy, the solar.

THE REAR:
more private.
Unexpected
(l'occasionnel),
secretive,
valuable and
religious functions.



THE FRONT:
more public.
Self-presentation,
social,
display (l'apparent)
and everyday secular
(l'usuel) functions.

DOWN: the animal, excremental, outcastes, death.

X=gods 0-cooking stove.

Table 140: polarities and hierarchies of the house.

The authors' comments on this diagram make it clear that the mandala model applies as much to the house as it does to the city:¹¹

Everything in the organisation of family life tends to enforce the separation of people and things according to their state of purity, and in virtue of these rules right is superior to left, high to low, symmetry to disorder, man to woman, and senior to junior.

The sacred realm composed in this way puts a crude, unorganised, chaotic and impure external sphere in opposition to a 'created' ordered, pure and internal sphere, needing protection as explained, but which, above all, constitutes a veritable 'labyrinthine staircase' in three dimensions; with taboos, physical and symbolic barriers, at every stage. Only those who can be admitted without the house being harmed in any way thereby will be able to approach the 'centre' which lies at the end of this path. Thus, in a metaphorical sense, going up to a higher storey means that one is approaching purity (p. 162).

The evidence for these oppositions comes from the authors' detailed descriptions of everyday life and religious practices. Among other topics they discuss the important lineage deity (digudyo) worship, the orientation of the cooking stove, and the stairs leading to it, the rules for sleeping arrangements, the rituals performed once a house is built and so on.

Here again, a case might be made for adding a historian or textual scholar to the team. In the ghar śānti pūjā described by the authors the central pillar of the house is identified with the lineage deity. However in the short text called Sthirobhavavākya, verses to be recited at the completion of a house, published by Slusser as appendix V to Nepal Mandala, the central pillar seems to be identified as Śiva. Perhaps this is due, paradoxical as it may seem, to the text's Buddhist provenance. However it may be, there is undoubtedly much textual material on architectural themes which the authors of Panauti have not been able to make use of. This is no reproach to them - by keeping the text to around 200 pages they have produced an attractive, yet scholarly, book, which deserves a wide audience - but it is an appeal for greater interdisciplinary cooperation, of a sort which the authors have shown to be possible. Only if architects and anthropologists, historians and Sanskritists, archaeologists and religious studies specialists put their skills together with the traditional knowledge of the priests, carpenters, artists, farmers and others of Nepal - only then can a proper holistic historical view be taken of a living tradition.

The Future of Tradition

Before turning to the authors' historical conclusions, it is worth considering their attitude to change and their recommendations for any planning that might be undertaken in Panauti in the future. In the final part of section three they discuss how a new suburb has developed outside the walls, particularly since the establishment of a 'buspark' from which buses depart regularly for Banepa and Kathmandu. In spite of the fact that many of the new houses continue old architectural practices and many old values survive, something altogether new has appeared:

The status of the 'outside' has changed... It seems quite likely that the centre of Panauti in the future will be there... Already people prefer to build there in complete freedom and disorder... Thus on one side there is the historical town, still very much alive with its traditional meanings and way of life, which is not very built-up, and hence is amenable to possible planning; on the other side, the new suburb spreads out, uncontrolled, chaotic, bringing in new economic values, and the nexus of communications which are becoming ever more important: the brutal opposition of these two realities calls for planned development (p. 195).

It has not been the authors' task to provide such a plan. As they point out, anyone trying to do so would have avoid old cliches or the trap of trying to turn the town into a museum: the inhabitants want development and their traditional values. But armed with the knowledge which the book so lucidly provides, and the timely warnings of its authors, planners might hope to have some success here, where in Kathmandu and Patan "uncontrolled, chaotic" development outside the old town has already gone too far for planning to have any chance of integrating the two.

Conclusion

The authors sum up the historical lesson of their book thus:

The royal city of the Newars, in its ideal model, defined, limited and organised itself according to religious and philosophical practices. In short the royal city (just as the kingdom itself) was a cosmic diagram... As for the political units of the Newars, these were very closely connected to Indian philosophical systems. They are real mandala, diagrams used by holy men for meditation, which represent the cosmos geometrically, with a centre surrounded by enclosures and fierce deities. In the centre stands the One, primordial consciousness: the palace and the gods associated with it are therefore luminous sources from which everything emanates. The enclosures mark out a sacred space: exactly the same applies to the city and its boundaries, real and symbolic... (E) very space, every architectural form, all behaviour...takes up this idea and these practices...(pp. 191-2).

But, the authors continue, it would be quite wrong to think that a philosophical model was forced onto the city; rather it was adapted to the triangular shape of the site, between two rivers, and to the settlement which already existed. This flexibility is perhaps reason to believe that some of the old architectural and spatial conceptions may survive Nepal's march to development.

NOTES

1. I would like to express my gratitude to the Leverhulme Fund which supported generously two years of fieldwork in Nepal, 1982-4, and to CNAS for the use of its facilities. The translations from the French are mine. I have included the French phrases in three cases in the diagram of the house reproduced above, where I have favoured one possible translation over others in order to render the ethnographic sense and bring out the oppositions.
2. On Dhulikhel see "The Social Structure of a Newar Trading Community East - Central Nepal" by Declan Quigley, Ph.D. thesis, LSE, 1984. Quigley points out that although it is an ancient settlement, the large number of Shresthas and their equivocal position vis-a-vis other Newars, make Dhulikhel in some ways more similar to hill settlements such as Bandipur or Gorkha.
3. Pīṭha (Newari, pīgamyā) may or may not be systematically distributed about the town. Shrines to Nāsadya (as noted in Ordered Space, p. 26) and chwāsā, the site where ritual leftovers are placed during most important life-crisis rites and on other occasions, are certainly so distributed, though whether anything follows from this, other than that every area must have them, is difficult to say at the present stage of research.
4. Slusser is puzzled by the same problem (Nepal Mandala: 102-3) but offers no solution. She seems to equate the upakhu wanegu route of Kathmandu, which follows the city walls, with the pradaksina patha, which runs well inside them. The palace at Bhaktapur, one should note, is remarkably off-centre compared to those of Patan or Kathmandu. Presumably Bhupatindra Malla put his tutelary deity in the famous Nyatapola temple at the central Taumadhi square for this reason (cf. Ordered Space: 18).
5. The French team's view is evidently derived from Ordered Space. Gutschow and Kölver must have noticed however that the pradaksina patha does not in fact separate pure from impure, because they suggest that the city walls must have been where the present pradaksina patha is at some time in the past (Ordered Space: 21)! Unless hard historical evidence for this is forthcoming, it must surely be regarded as a fairly desperate attempt to save the hypothesis.
6. See Quigley, op.cit. pp.30-1. Hofer's Caste and State in Nepal discusses the legal basis of these terms in the Muluki Ain of 1854, see in particular pages 167-9.
7. Gutschow and Kölver pointed out (Ordered Space: 42) that the Jogi constitute something of an anomaly, but explained it merely by citing the fact that they are needed for death rites.

8. See the map on p. 155 of Stadtraum und Ritual.
9. Gutschow and Kölver, Ordered Space, p. 36: "It is a declared aim of Hindu town planning during the Middle Ages to realize and embody transcendental concepts within in framework of a town." Clearly the classical texts and Medieval cities were produced by the same tradition. But were these texts used normatively, as a set of architectural guidelines by the builders and planners, or were they merely post hoc codifications of structures which kings and priests and carpenters were capable of producing on their own?
10. This point had already been made by Macdonald and Stahl, Newar Art, p. 116.
11. Macdonald and Stahl (Newar Art: 118) expressed it epigrammatically "House-space and town-space are envisaged in the same terms. One is smaller than the other: both have the same structure."

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